Tricks the experts use to prepare tasty and nutritious meals

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A nutritious meal does not have to be tasteless. Learning the cooking tricks of the experts can turn anyone into a healthy cook. The secret is understanding which foods to choose, and knowing a variety of ways to prepare them.

The secret to cooking healthier meals is figuring out where to skim fat and calories, so you can lighten up a recipe without skimping on flavor. And cooking healthy doesn't have to mean cooking from scratch. You can start with convenience foods and add a few healthy ingredients for healthful "halfway homemade" meals.

To make sure your meals are chock-full of healthy vitamins, minerals, and disease-fighting antioxidants, choose the most nutrient-rich foods (such as deeply colored fruits and vegetables) as the basis for your recipes. Try using one of our lightened recipes, or make over your own favorite family recipes with substitutions that add nutrients while subtracting fat and calories.

Here are some foods that experts say should be on any health-conscious shopper's grocery list:

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| Tomatoes | These juicy, red fruits are loaded with the antioxidant lycopene, which has been shown to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease in women. |
| Low-fat proteins | Good sources of lean protein include seafood, skinless white-meat poultry, eggs, lean beef (tenderloin, sirloin, eye of round), and skim or low-fat yogurts, milk, and cheeses. Some research has indicated that a diet moderately high in protein can keep hunger at bay, and thus help you lose weight. |
| Whole grains, oats, and fibrous foods | Fiber helps your digestive tract work properly and lowers cholesterol levels while keeping your belly feeling full. Whole grains also contain antioxidants, are fat free, and are easy to fit into your diet. |
| Berries (red and blue), including grapes | Berries are loaded with vitamins and minerals, as well as phytochemicals with cancer-fighting properties. Red grapes, in the form of one glass of red wine daily, may even reduce the risk of heart disease, according to the American Heart Association. (If you're a nondrinker, check with a doctor before starting.) |
| Nuts | A handful of almonds, cashews, pecans, or walnuts provides fiber, vitamin E, and healthful, monounsaturated fats. Just watch your portion size; these nutritious nuggets are high in calories. |
| Fish and fish oil | Fish and fish oilcontain omega-3 fatty acids that can reduce the risk of heart disease by protecting the heart against inflammation. The American Heart Association recommends eating fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, tuna, or sardines at least twice a week. |
| Unsaturated fats | Oils such as olive, canola, and soybean are the best kind of fats. |
| Low-fat dairy products | Low-fat dairy products provide plenty of calcium to help keep bones and teeth strong, are a great source of protein, and may even enhance weight loss, according to some research. |
| Vegetables | Vegetables are a healthful eater's best friend. All veggies, except avocadoes, are fat-free and loaded with disease-fighting phytochemicals. |
| Legumes | Legumes (like pinto, garbanzo, kidney and black beans and lentils) are underrated. The lowly bean is naturally fat free and loaded with protein, fiber, vitamins, and minerals, especially iron. They add few calories, but keep you feeling full. |

The right gadgets and cookware can also help improve the flavor and taste of your meals. For example, with a simple grill pan, you can grill everything from fruits and vegetables to meats -- and the fat just drips away. The following is a list of suggested items to have on hand in the kitchen:

Nonstick Frying Pans, Saucepans, and Skillets

Blender or Food Processor

Slow Cooker

Hand Food Chopper

Oil Sprayer

Plastic Flexible Cutting Mat

Meat Mallet

Microwave Vegetable Cooker

Bread Machine

Juicer

Hand Citrus Zester

Silicon Basting Brush

Gas Stove or Cooktop

Convection Oven

Indoor Grill

A Good Mixer